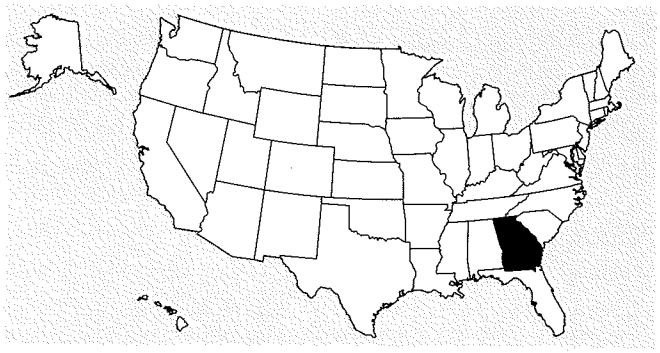
Teaching with Historic Places



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Andersonville: Prisoner of War Camp

BY ALAN MARSH

John McElroy wrote in 1864 of the beginning of his stay at the Confederacy's largest prison camp, Andersonville Prison, or Camp Sumter as it was officially known, in southwest Georgia:

> Five hundred men moved silently toward the gates that would shut out life and hope for most of them forever. Quarter of a mile from the railroad we came into a massive palisade with great squared logs standing upright in the ground. Fires blazed up and showed us a section of these and two massive wooden gates with heavy iron hinges and bolts. They swung open as we stood there and we passed through into the space beyond. We were at Andersonville.[1]

Approximately 45,000 prisoners would enter Andersonville's gates during its 14-month existence. Nearly 13,000 would never see freedom again.

This lesson will help students discover why Andersonville has come to symbolize the treatment of all prisoners of war and how prisoners cope with an environment that deprives them of liberties we usually take for granted. It could be used with units on the Civil War or on prisoners of war. Materials for the lesson are from the National Register of Historic Places registration file on Andersonville National Historic Site, park documents, and publications. Students will practice skills of interpretive reading, analysis of visual data, and synthesis of disparate forms of data.

Objectives for the Students

- To describe living conditions in a Civil War prison camp and the causes of these conditions.
- To discuss methods used by prisoners to cope with the prison environment and conditions.
- To explain how value systems influence attitudes and behavior of prisoners of war.
- To examine Andersonville's emotional impact on the nation during the post-war months.
- To identify the location of prisoner of war camps in their community or region. (Many camps existed in the United States during the Civil War and World War II).

Teaching Activities

Setting the Stage

Explain to students that when the Southern states first considered secession, most people believed that if war came, it would be brief. They did not envision four years of fighting that would lead to cruel deaths and thousands captured as prisoners of war. In 1862 a system of parole and exchange was informally adopted by the Union and Confederate governments. A "paroled" prisoner pledged not to participate in the war or assist his allies. He would often be released on the spot to proceed to a camp where paroled soldiers were concentrated until the two governments officially exchanged prisoners. He could then return to the military. In the fall of 1863, the U.S. government suspended exchanges. The growing number of captured soldiers soon began filling Union and Confederate prisons.

Although conditions were bad in both Southern and Northern prison camps, the large number of prisoner deaths at Andersonville combined with the defeat of the Confederate states to focus national attention and public outrage on the treatment of Union prisoners there.

Locating the Site

Have students examine Map Exhibit 1 and name the states with prison camps. Ask them to suggest reasons for building a prison at a particular location. Locate Andersonville Prison in south-central Georgia. Next, examine Map Exhibit 2. Using data from this map, have students suggest additional reasons for prison camp locations, specifically Andersonville (on rail-

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road line to transport prisoners, near water, away from potential battlefields, isolated from population centers, but in an agricultural region for food supply). Discuss their ideas but do not provide closure until Reading 1 has been completed.

Determining the Facts

Reading 1: Andersonville Prison

Have students complete Reading 1 and then answer the following questions:

1. Why was Andersonville chosen as the site for a prison camp? Check to see if the reasons are similar to those raised in "Locating the Site." Discuss any new ideas presented.
2. Why did the prison have such a high mortality rate?
3. Who was responsible for the conditions and deaths at Andersonville? (Discuss possibilities: Wirz, U.S. government by ending exchange system, Confederate government, no one cause, etc.).
4. After the war, prisoners held at Andersonville returned home with horrible stories of prison life. What post-war events were directly influenced by former prisoners (establishment of national cemetery, Wirz trial)?
5. "Wirz was the last casualty of Andersonville." Do you think this is true? Explain your reasons. Was justice carried out? Discuss.

Reading 2: Life as a Prisoner

Have the students complete Reading 2 and answer the following questions:

1. Define the terms "shebang," "deadhouse," and "sutler."
2. What did the prisoners do to keep themselves occupied and entertained?
3. What were some necessities the prisoners lacked? Why weren't these items available?
4. What were the leading causes of death? Why?
5. Discuss the terms "values," "ethics," and "morals." Did prisoners exhibit such beliefs? (Examples are: sharing shebangs, caring for sick, opposing Raiders, using a jury trial for Raiders.)
6. If you had the money, what could you buy in the prison?
7. What means of escape were attempted by prisoners?
8. Some families knew their loved ones were imprisoned at Andersonville, while others did not know where they were, or if they were alive. How do you think the families felt in each case?

Visual Evidence

Have students examine Photos 1 and 2 of Andersonville Prison and then answer the following questions:

1. Locate the shebangs, sinks, and stockade walls in Photo 1. Can you find the tops of any pigeon roosts rising above the walls?
2. What are the prisoners doing in Photo 2? After students develop some hypotheses, explain that prisoners are burying the dead in a trench. Ask them to describe the importance of Dorence Atwater's work of labeling each body before burial.

Next, have students examine Illustration 1, a detail from the painting *A Picture Worth a Thousand Words*, and read the accompanying commentary. Then ask them to answer the following questions:

1. Consider again the impact that Andersonville Prison had on its occupants. Was it greater or less than you suggested earlier?
2. Can you locate the sources that polluted Stockade Branch?
3. Find the prisoners who are on their way to the stockade from the railroad. Listen to the description of this event by John McElroy (read the introduction to the students). Does that description agree with the events and mood of the painting?
4. What uses of wood (by prisoners and others) do you see in the painting (shebangs, stockade, buildings, bridges, sinks)? Why was wood necessary but hard to acquire?

Putting It All Together

Andersonville Prison was shut down when the war ended in 1865. Some former prisoners remained in federal service, but most returned to their prewar civilian occupations. Andersonville Prison would not be forgotten, either by those who experienced it or by later generations of Americans. It continues to symbolize the prisoner of war experience: physical and mental suffering and the need to cope with almost intolerable conditions. The following activities will provide students with an opportunity to better comprehend the prisoner of war experience and understand how the story of Andersonville is relevant today.

Activity 1: Empathetic Response

Have students pretend they are prisoners at Camp Sumter (Andersonville Prison). Have them each write a letter to someone back home or make a series of diary entries in which they express their feelings and describe prison conditions. Have several students read their papers aloud or, if

papers are prepared on computers, produce a class newspaper that reprints their works.

Activity 2: Family History

Have students with an ancestor who fought or lived during the Civil War research that person's life. Have other students find and read firsthand accounts of the war. (Most libraries have several volumes of such accounts.) Ask all students to write an essay describing what those persons did during the war and how the war affected their lives. Post these essays on a bulletin board or include them in the newspaper developed for Activity 1.

Activity 3: Money in Prison

As students enter the classroom, assume the role of the "sutler" and issue them various amounts of "money." (Use play money or simply give them a slip of paper that states the amount of money they are allotted.) Stress to them that this money must last throughout their prison stay. As the class begins, tell students that no rations will be issued. If they are to eat, they must buy from the "sutler's" (your) supply. Have the students determine what they would buy, based on the figures in Reading 1. Would they need to pay to have their hair cut or laundry washed? Would they try to save some of their money until they are released? Give students about 10 minutes to make their decisions, and then call on several students who were allotted different amounts of money. Have them report on their spending. Then ask other students to explain the guidelines they used to "budget" their funds.

Activity 4: The Raiders' Trial

Have students "reenact" the Raiders' trial (excluding carrying out the sentence!). Select six Raiders, a defense lawyer, a prosecution lawyer, and a number of prisoners to testify. Specific accusations must be made from the (imagined) personal experiences of the prisoners. The class can act as jury and decide the fate of the Raiders. (The same idea can be used with the trial of Captain Wirz.)

Activity 5: Prisoner of War Camps

Ask the students to research the existence of prisoner of war camps (from any war) in their local area, their state, or a nearby state. The state historical library can provide research materials if a camp was located in the state or in a nearby state. Where were the prisoners from? Compare this prison with Andersonville.

Activity 6: Interview a Former Prisoner of War

As a class, develop an outline for an interview or discussion questions to ask a former prisoner of war (POW). Students may arrange interviews on their own, or you may ask a former POW to speak to your class. (Organizations such as the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars are excellent sources for locating former prisoners of war who are willing to visit schools.) On the following day, have students compare their guest's experience with that of the prisoners at Andersonville.

Activity 7: The Layout of a Prison Camp

Examine Map Exhibit 3. Have students note the layout of the prison complex. What could have been done differently to make life better for the prisoners (larger water supply, locate bakehouse in different area, larger stockade, etc.)? Have students draw a sketch of a prison layout that would be more efficient as well as healthier for the prisoners. If you invite a former POW to visit the class, ask for a sketch of the camp he or she was in and compare it to Andersonville.

Visiting the Site

Andersonville National Historic Site is located 10 miles northeast of Americus on Georgia Highway 49. The 482-acre park consists of the site of Andersonville Prison and a national cemetery. A visitor center and museum contain information on Civil War prisons and the overall prisoner of war story. The grounds are open daily from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. The visitor center and museum are closed Christmas and New Year's Day. For more information, write to Andersonville National Historic Site, Route 1, Box 800, Andersonville, GA 31711.

Alan Marsh is Supervisory Park Ranger at Andersonville National Historic Site.

Fay Metcalf, the series editor for Teaching with Historic Places lesson plans, is an education consultant living in Mesa, Arizona.

NOTES

1. John McElroy, *This Was Andersonville,* Ray Meredith, ed. (New York: Fairfax Press, 1979), p.5.

This is one in a series of lesson plans by the National Register of Historic Places and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The National Register is maintained by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, as a means of recognizing properties significant in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture. Each registration file contains a description of the property, an explanation of its historical importance, one or more photographs, one or more maps, and sometimes other documentation. The computerized National Register Information System (NRIS) can produce listings according to location, historical function, historical theme, and other categories. To obtain copies of registration documents or NRIS information, contact Teaching with Historic Places, *National Register of Historic Places, Interagency Resources Division, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20013-7127, or phone (202) 343-9536. The National Trust and its 250,000 members support preservation organizations and programs in neighborhoods and communities throughout the United States where staff and volunteers are available to work with their schools. For more information on the National Trust's educational programs, please write Heritage Education, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1785 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036, or phone (202) 673-4040.*

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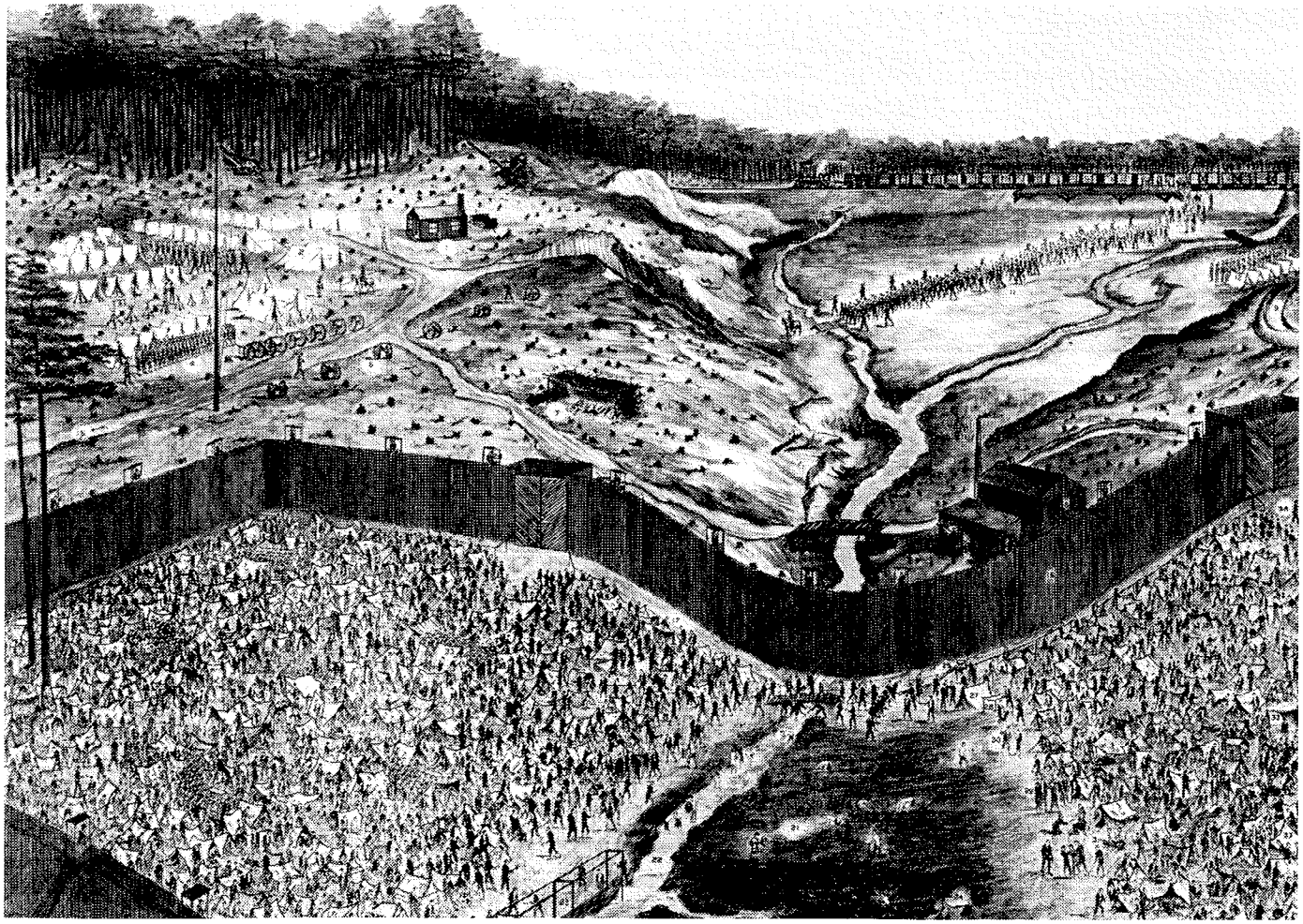
Illustration 1.



A Picture Worth a Thousand Words

I never drew a picture before in my life. Were I an artist, I could have completed it in a short time. I commenced this work in the winter of 1879 and finished it in 1885 devoting to it my leisure moments for over 5 years....

...In executing the work, I had no picture, map, plan or scale to guide or instruct me, but I relied upon and drew the whole subject from memory. To the casual observer, such a thing may be looked upon as absurd and impossible, that it is impossible after such a length of time for "memory" to retain such a perfect list and one of details as here portrayed and that I must have had assistance from some other source to be able to present such a vast combination of characters and situations in so perfect manner. Ah, my friends, had you been there and experienced the sufferings that, in common with the thousands of other unfortunates who "were there," you too, like myself, would have the whole panorama photographed in your memory to remain there to your dying day....

Thomas O'Dea, 1887

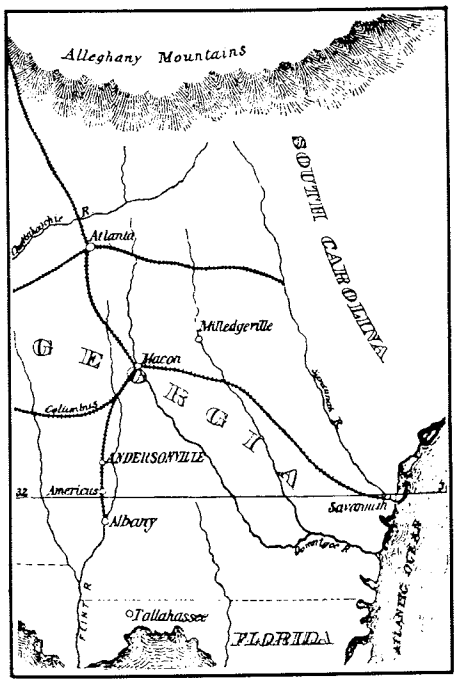
Map Exhibit 1.

Civil War Prison Camps (Andersonville National Historic Site, National Park Service)

1. Belle Isle - Richmond, Virginia
2. Cahaba Prison - Cahaba, Alabama
3. Camp Chase - Columbus, Ohio
4. Camp Douglas - Chicago, Illinois
5. Camp Florence - Florence, South Carolina
6. Camp Lawton - Millen, Georgia
7. Camp Morton - Indianapolis, Indiana
8. Camp Sumter - Andersonville, Georgia
9. Castle Pickney - Charleston, S.C.
10. Elmira Prison - Elmira, New York
11. Johnson's Island - Sandusky, Ohio
12. Libby Prison - Richmond, Virginia
13. Old Capitol Prison - Washington, D.C.
14. Point Lookout - Point Lookout, Maryland
15. Rock Island - Rock Island, Illinois
16. Salisbury - Salisbury, North Carolina

Map Exhibit 2.

Location of Andersonville, Georgia (Andersonville National Historic Site, National Park Service)



Map Exhibit 3.

Andersonville Prison (Andersonville National Historic Site, National Park Service)

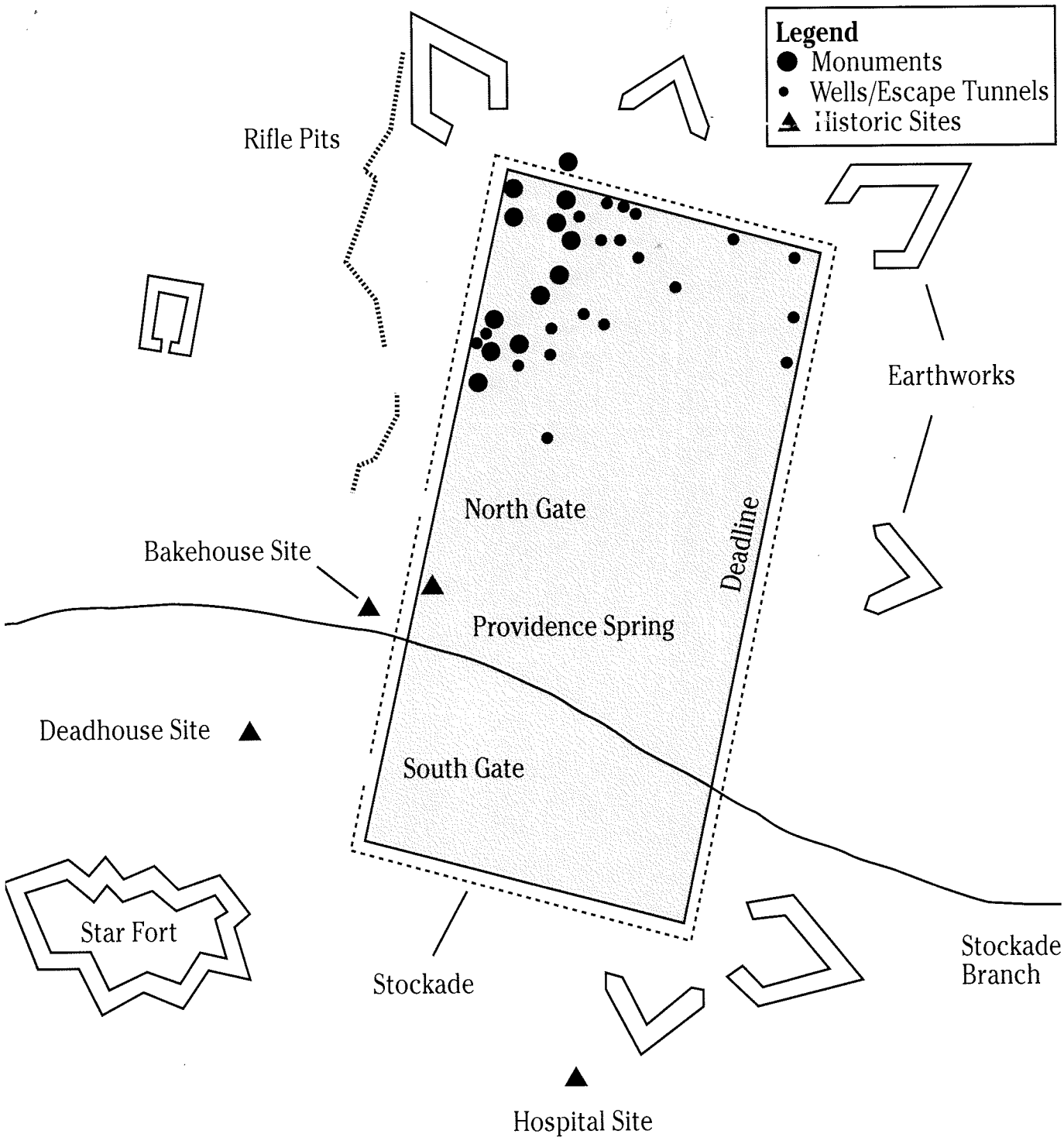


Photo 1.

Andersonville Prison—Looking Southeast from the Sinks, 1864 (Andersonville National Historic Site, National Park Service)

Photo 2.

Andersonville Prison, 1864 (Andersonville National Historic Site, National Park Service)

Reading 1: Andersonville Prison

Andersonville, or Camp Sumter as it was officially known, was the largest of several military prisons established during the Civil War. It was built in 1864 after Confederate leaders decided to move the many Union prisoners in Richmond, Virginia, to a location away from the war. A site was needed where the prisoners could be guarded by fewer men, there would be less chance of military raids to free them, and food would be more abundant. The town of Andersonville was located on a railroad line approximately 65 miles southwest of Macon, Georgia. The village, near a small stream and in a remote agricultural area, seemed ideal. Construction of the 16½ acre prison camp began in January 1864. Pine logs, 20 feet in length, were placed five feet deep in the ground to create a wooden stockade. In June 1864, the prison was enlarged to 26½ acres. The prison proper was in the shape of a rectangle 1,620 feet long and 779 feet wide. Sentry boxes, or "pigeon roosts," were placed at 30 yard intervals along the top of the stockade. Along the interior of the stockade, 19 feet from the stockade wall, was a line of small wooden posts with a wood rail on top. This was the "deadline." Any prisoner who crossed the deadline could be shot by guards stationed in the sentry boxes.

The first prisoners arrived on February 25, 1864, while the stockade wall was still under construction. Small earthworks, equipped with artillery, overlooked the compound. Designed to hold 10,000 prisoners, the prison was soon overcrowded, holding 22,000 by June. Although the prison was enlarged, the number of prisoners continued to swell. By August 1864, more than 32,000 prisoners were confined at Andersonville.

Handicapped by deteriorating economic conditions, an inadequate transportation system, and the need to concentrate all available resources on its own army, the Confederate government was unable to provide adequate housing, food, clothing, shelter, and medical care for its captives. These conditions, along with a breakdown of the prisoner exchange system, created much suffering and a high mortality rate. More than 45,000 Union soldiers were sent to Andersonville during the 14 months of the prison's existence. Of these, 12,912 died from disease, malnutrition, overcrowding, or exposure. They were buried in shallow trenches, shoulder to shoulder, in a crude cemetery near the prison.

In September 1864, when General William T. Sherman's forces occupied Atlanta and a Union cavalry column threatened Andersonville's security, most of the prisoners were moved to other camps in Georgia and South Carolina. The prison operated on a much smaller scale for the remaining six months of the war.

Following the Confederate surrender in April 1865, Clara Barton, later founder of the American Red Cross, and Dorence Atwater, a former prisoner assigned as a parolee to keep burial records for prison officials, visited the cemetery at Andersonville to identify and mark the graves of the Union dead. During the war Atwater had labeled the soldiers by name and number after their deaths. Through Barton and Atwater's efforts, the cemetery was dedicated as Andersonville National Cemetery in August 1865.

Another important event that occurred after the war was the arrest and trial of Captain Henry Wirz, the commandant of the prison. Wirz was arrested and charged with conspiring to "impair and injure the health and destroy the lives of federal prisoners" and with "murder in violation of the laws of war." At his trial in Washington D.C., many former prisoners testified against him, vividly describing conditions at the prison. The former prisoners (and one who testified but was never actually a prisoner) blamed Wirz as the cause of their suffering. Historical documents, however, attest to the fact that prison officials attempted to acquire supplies for the prisoners but were severely hampered by the need to use supplies for the military and war effort. The question of whether or not Wirz could have done more to make life more bearable for the prisoners is still debated today. Was he simply a convenient scapegoat? Because of public out-

rage and indignation in the North over conditions at Andersonville, Captain Henry Wirz was found guilty of war crimes and was hanged on November 10, 1865. It has been said that Wirz was the last casualty of Andersonville.

Compiled from J. Mark Bollinger and Brenda Landrum, eds., Andersonville National Historic Site *(Eastern National Park and Monument Association, 1987); Ovid Futch,* History of Andersonville Prison, *(Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1968); John McElroy,* This Was Andersonville, *Roy Meredith, ed. (New York: Fairfax Press, 1979); John Ransom,* John Ransom's Andersonville Diary *(New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1986); and National Register of Historic Places documentation for Andersonville National Historic Site.*

Reading 2: Life as a Prisoner

Soldiers and civilian support personnel from 26 states and the District of Columbia were imprisoned at Andersonville. Among the diverse prison population at Andersonville were American Indians, African Americans, men from several foreign countries, and two women. All prisoners found themselves confronting common obstacles and problems at Andersonville, including the need for shelter, clothing, food, water, and medical attention. Prisoners tried in various ways to make the most of a terrible situation.

Prisoners arriving at Andersonville quickly discovered that they lacked many of life's basic necessities. Many were without shelter and constructed crude dwellings known as "shebangs," made from various items including cloth, mud bricks, tree limbs, and brush. One group of prisoners, including a printer from Trenton, New Jersey, constructed a shebang by sewing together "the sleeve and back linings of my blouse...our sugar and coffee bags, and...the flap of Hoffman's knapsack."[1] In some instances, prisoners shared their shebangs with others and cared for those who were sick.

Clothing also presented a problem at the prison and prisoners spent much time mending their torn clothes. Some prisoners did not even have clothes. When a prisoner died and was carried out of the stockade to the "deadhouse" before burial, he would be stripped and his clothes were taken back inside the prison. (On one such occasion, the prisoner being stripped was discovered to be a female). Besides being torn and tattered, the clothing was consistently dirty, as soap was hard to come by and often not available at all. Prisoners sometimes used sand as a soap substitute. Twenty-one-year-old Albert Shatzel, a private in Company A, First Vermont Cavalry, recorded during his first day at Andersonville that "since the day I was Born I never saw such misery as there is here...they can't get aney soap or aney thing else to wash their clothes with."[2] Another prisoner, John Ransom, made the most of his situation by operating a barber shop and a laundry service (using sand for soap).

Perhaps the worst condition prisoners faced was the lack of food and water. The standard daily food ration was one-quarter pound of cornmeal and either one-third pound of bacon or one pound of beef. Sometimes other items would be issued such as peas or molasses. Often the rations were issued uncooked and prisoners had to cook for themselves. That was not an easy task since firewood was scarce. Prisoners often combined their rations and cooked them together. If a prisoner had money, he could do business with the sutler, who operated a small store within the stockade and sold vegetables and other food. In May 1864 eggs sold for 50 cents each, molasses 12 dollars a gallon, bacon 6 dollars a pound, cornbread 40 cents a loaf, and flour one dollar a pint. Black beans were 40 cents a pint. In June baking soda was 25 cents a spoonful, blackberries 60 cents a pint, and beans had risen to one dollar a pint.

One reason Camp Sumter was built at Andersonville was the availability of water. A small stream, called Stockade Branch, flowed through the stockade. This water source, however, flowed through two Confederate encampments and the prison bakehouse before reaching the prisoners. Once it reached the stockade it was the only water supply for drinking, washing clothes, and bathing. The prison latrines, or "sinks," were built on the hillside above the branch and overflowed after heavy rains, sending the contents into the water supply and coating the ground after the water subsided. Among several diary entries by prisoners, John Ransom's account is less graphic than some, but straight to the point. Ransom wrote "There is so much filth about the camp that it is terrible trying to live here."[3] When a spring flowed out of the ground after a heavy August rainstorm and created a new water supply, the prisoners, attributing it to an act of Providence, named it Providence Spring.

It is no surprise that under these circumstances sickness was rampant in Andersonville Prison. A hospital originally located within the stockade was later moved outside. Some tents were used, and eventually wooden buildings built, but they were not enough to accommodate

the large number of sick. From February 25 to May 9, 1864, 4,588 patients received treatment and 1,026 died.[4] The leading causes of death as reported by the medical staff were diarrhea, dysentery, and scorbutus (scurvy).

Inside the prison, a group of prisoners called the "Raiders" banded together to improve their situation by preying on fellow prisoners. Operating in large groups, the Raiders stole food and property by force. Armed with clubs and other items, the Raiders sometimes killed to obtain money, jewelry, clothes, and food. For several months during the spring and early summer of 1864, the Raiders literally ruled the inner stockade at Andersonville. Finally, in late June and early July of 1864, a group of prisoners banded together to oppose the Raiders. The "Regulators," with the permission of Captain Wirz, rounded up the Raiders. Once captured, many were forced to run between two lines of fellow prisoners who beat them as they ran. Others had to wear a ball and chain or were put in the stocks. Six leaders of the Raiders suffered a worse fate. These men were tried by a jury of 12 fellow prisoners and found guilty of murder. They were sentenced to hang, and the sentence was carried out on July 11, 1864.

To cope with the horrible conditions within the stockade, prisoners turned to various activities. They carved objects, sang songs, played games such as checkers and cards, read any material they could get, and wrote letters and diaries. Letters home were censored by prison officials, and many never reached their destinations. Other prisoners, intent on escape, spent time digging tunnels. Although there are no records of successful escapes via tunnels, some men did escape, mainly from work crews when outside the prison. The escape of one ingenious soldier was recorded by John Ransom on May 16, 1864. "A funny way of escape has just been discovered by Wirz. A man pretends to be dead and is carried on a stretcher, left with the row of the dead. As soon as it gets dark Mr. Deadman jumps up and runs."[5]

The horrendous living conditions at Andersonville resulted in the deaths of thousands of prisoners. John Ransom, who was imprisoned at Andersonville for seven months, attributed his ability to survive to "an iron constitution that has carried me through, and above all a disposition to make the best of everything no matter how bad, and considerable willpower with the rest."[6]

Compiled from J. Mark Bollinger and Brenda G. Landrum, eds., The Story of Andersonville Prison and American Prisoners of War *(Eastern National Park and Monument Association, 1987); Donald F. Danker, ed. "Imprisoned at Andersonville: The Diary of Albert Harry Shatzel, May 5, 1864 - September 12, 1864,"* Nebraska History, *XXXVIII (1958); Ovid Futch,* History of Andersonville Prison *(Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1968); John McElroy,* This Was Andersonville, *Roy Meredith, ed. (New York: Fairfax Press, 1979); and John Ransom,* John Ransom's Andersonville Diary *(New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1986).*

NOTES

1. Ovid Futch, History of Andersonville Prison, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1968), p.31.
2. Donald F. Danker, (ed.), "Imprisoned at Andersonville: The Diary of Harry Shatzel, May 5, 1864-September 12, 1864," Nebraska History, XXXVIII (1958), p. 92.
3. Ransom, p. 66.
4. Futch, p.33.
5. Ransom, p.79.
6. Ransom, p.159.